

**NETTIE CAROLINE
WILLIAMS
McBIRNEY
1887-1982**



**AUNT
CHICK:
BAKING
VISIONARY**

In November 2004, an envelope containing a red plastic Santa Claus cookie cutter was delivered to The Daily Oklahoman Food Editor Sharon Dowell, introducing her to a part of Oklahoma culinary history she never knew – and to food columnist Nettie McBirney.

Nettie Caroline Williams was born in November 1887 in Minnesota. She came to Oklahoma in 1909, teaching home economics at Claremore and Muskogee before marrying Tulsa banker Samuel Pendleton McBirney in 1913.

In 1935, without telling her husband, she began writing a food advice column called “Kitchen Log” for \$15 a week at the Tulsa World, under the pseudonym Aunt Chick, Nettie’s pet name. Oklahoma was still suffering from the Great Depression. When Sam found out, he was not happy. “That crazy woman will start a run on the bank if people think she has to work!”

Soon Nettie began inventing kitchen aids – a rolling-pin cover to prevent dough from sticking and a non-stick pastry canvas for rolling out dough. She convinced the owner of Vandever’s Department Store -- the grand dame of Tulsa shopping -- to let her do cooking shows. She took her hugely successful show on the road, to leading stores across America, including Macy’s in New York.

In 1936 she invented a ‘Crispy Crust’ pie pan with a wire bottom that promised perfect bottom crusts. A young woman at her cooking show told Nettie that a broken oven kept the door ajar, resulting in perfect meringue. The practice soon became widely respected. In 1939, she published “Aunt Chick’s Pies”, which sold over 650,000 copies.

In 1948 she created her famous cookie cutters, with no right angles or glossy back but with all curves and funny bumps on the inside to help the dough easily slide out of the cutter and maintain a three-dimensional appearance. Princess Margaret purchased Christmas cutters for Prince Charles’ fourth Christmas in 1952 and Wrigley sold 70,000 sets as a special promotion in only six weeks.

She wrote her Tulsa World cooking column for twenty years until the 1950’s. In 1973, she donated over 1,000 cookbooks to the Tulsa City-County Library. McBirney died in 1982.

By the late 1980s, the cookie cutters Carrie Falzone’s grandmother bought in 1949 were worn out. Unable to restore them, she began looking for replacements. Aunt Chick’s 3D Cookie Cutters hadn’t been produced for decades and bakers hoarded them for fear of never finding replacements.

Carrie found the Jolly Santa cutters, bought the mold, copyright and all the remaining cutters. She also bought the company and renamed it Gramma’s Cutters, and then began researching the history of Aunt Chick. In 2001, she purchased a Merry Christmas set from a Tulsa dealer and learned of a warehouse with 18,000 nearby. She bought the whole lot.

After selling them all through a small ad in the holiday issue of “Martha Steward Living” magazine, Carrie convinced the McBirneys to sell all their cutters, and the rights to them. “These cutters make more than just cookies; they are a labor of love that brings family and friends together,” Falzone said. “I doubt Aunt Chick knew she was going to touch so many people as she did for so many years.”